

Signal Corps Aircraft Number One – dawn of military flight

Lt. Benjamin Foulois piloted the first military airplane, Signal Corps Aircraft Number One, into the air at Fort Sam Houston March 2, 1910.

Signal Corps Aircraft Number One was a pusher-type biplane with two propellers. Its wingspan was 36 feet 5 inches and its length was 30 feet 8 inches.

Power was provided by one Wright Model 4 gasoline engine generating 35 horsepower. The aircraft carried thirteen gallons of fuel and two and a half gallons of engine coolant.

It was steered by warping the wings and adjusting the position of the front and rear horizontal planes.

Launching the 1,263 pound aircraft was complicated.

The aircraft had to be placed on a trolley which sat on a 55-foot long

track. The track had to be oriented into the wing.

A 1,400-pound weight, suspended from a 30-foot tall tower, was attached to the plane by a cable. With the engine turning at full power, the weight was released, pulling the plane along the track until it lifted off.

Of course, if the wind shifted during this process, the launch track had to be re-oriented. The catapult launch was the principal limitation of use of the aircraft.

If the plane landed away from the catapult, it could not take off again under its own power.

The aircraft was not quite perfect for military use.

Foulois' mission, besides teaching himself how to fly, was to adapt



it to military functions and figure out how to integrate the aircraft into the Army's operations.

One of the first modifications added a seat belt to keep the pilot on board when the airplane was buffeted by weather.

Foulois also had his men fabricate landing gear for the plane eliminating the catapult and increasing the use and flexibility of the aircraft a hundred fold.

Equally important,

Foulois adapted the arcane and technological terminology of aviation understandable to the Army.

He developed a set of drill regulations for a provisional Aero Squadron, and accordingly, handling of aircraft on the ground was to be performed "by the numbers," just like every other evolution or drill in the Army.

In the six months following the inaugural flight at Fort Sam

Houston, Foulois took his aircraft aloft fifty-eight more times, modifying the machine and repairing it following regular mishaps and crashes.

In February 1911, Robert Collier loaned his Wright Model B aircraft to the Army, allowing Foulois to retire Aircraft Number One.

On May 4 1911, "Old Number One" was retired to the Smithsonian Institution.

In just over one year

of hard service, Signal Corps Aircraft Number One had demonstrated that flying machines could perform military functions satisfactorily.

(Excerpted from: "The Origin of Military Aviation in Texas, 1910-1913" by William C. Pool)